

The Moderates' Predicament

Martin Luther King's last book was titled *Where Do We Go from Here?* The question was not merely rhetorical. For as long as two years before the murder in Memphis, the civil rights movement was divided, with no clear direction, no certain answers, and dozens of would-be leaders vying for the allegiance of the black masses, particularly those in the nation's ghettos. With King's death, the question—and the answer—becomes urgently compelling.

King had the widest following of any black leader, but even he could claim nothing like universal loyalty. Though he was admired and respected by the vast majority of Negroes, his real influence was largely limited to the



THE REV. RALPH ABERNATHY AT FUNERAL HOME
Some clues to the future.

South, where the Negro pastor has traditionally had a strong hold on his flock (see RELIGION) and where King could point to concrete victories as legal segregation was progressively being abolished. In the North, where racial attitudes are subtler and the Negroes' plight is largely one of economic deprivation, he never achieved comparable success.

The Bridge. In the workers' ghettos, King was sometimes ignored—or worse. He had difficulty in effectively organizing Chicago slum dwellers in 1966; militants in Harlem showered him with rotten eggs in 1965. Many radicals derided his pleas for nonviolence—though few were unmoved by his death, as was New York City's William Epton, who was convicted of conspiring to commit criminal anarchy for his part in the 1964 Harlem riots. "We don't mourn King," said Epton. "We saw him as an obstacle to the black liberation movement. We saw him as a fireman for Kennedy and Johnson."

For all the sniping, King nonetheless came closer than any other American to bridging the widening gap between

militants and moderates, and if he could not claim to speak for "the Negro," he could at least claim to speak for more Negroes and more pointedly for their cause than anyone else had ever succeeded in doing.

No one can take his place, but at this juncture perhaps no one needs to. "It would be tragic to get caught up in a 'Who speaks for the black community?' trap," says Boston City Councilman Thomas Atkins, a Negro. "There is no spokesman for the white community. Why should there be for the black?" Adds National Urban League Director Whitney Young: "I am not looking today for a black leader to replace Dr. King. I am looking for an American leader who will lead us all to justice."

Instead of one pre-eminent Negro spokesman like King—or two or three like Walter White, Roy Wilkins and Thurgood Marshall in the '40s and early '50s—there are dozens today, each speaking for Negroes in his own area or in his own economic or social sphere. A nationwide attack on poverty or discrimination may be doomed to failure, but an assault on a specific or local ill may very well prove to be successful. A few of the militants, points out Harvard Government Professor Martin Kilson, are discovering the meaning of *quid pro quo*—and gaining meaningful concessions from the white community with promises to work for peace in the ghetto.

Newark Concordat. Thus, in what Kilson, himself a Negro, calls "almost a concordat," such militants as LeRoi Jones and Willie Wright walked the streets of Newark to urge calm after King's murder. A few weeks before King's death, city hall and the Negro community agreed to a compromise in the urban-renewal dispute that helped spark last summer's uprising. City hall's price: the militants' promise to help preserve order. This new realism—on both sides—is seen by Kilson as the next phase of the civil rights movement, analogous to the compromises that other ethnic groups made with then-hostile majorities in their struggles for equality. "Ultimately, if the Black Power boys are going to achieve anything," he says, "they've got to come to grips with the political process."

In the short run, the murder in Memphis will probably increase the power of the militants. "The way things are today," observes Floyd McKissick, chairman of the Congress of Racial Equality, "not even Christ could come back and preach nonviolence."

Some clues to the long-term future of the moderates will come May 12—Mother's Day—the date that has now been chosen for King's proposed "Poor People's March on Washington." Its organizers, led by the Rev. Ralph Abernathy, 42, King's best friend and hand-picked successor to lead the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, fervently hope that it will be peaceable.